

## Common Witch Hazel

This is common witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*), also known as American witch hazel. This beautiful fall-blooming small tree is native throughout the United States east of the Mississippi. It typically grows 15 to 20 feet tall. Wild plants occasionally reach as much as 30 feet tall. Witch hazels are easily grown in either sun or part shade. While moderately drought tolerant, they prefer moist soil. In the wild they can be found growing on woodland slopes, moist woods and high hammocks throughout South Carolina.



Common witch hazel blooming in November.  
Joey Williamson ©2006 HGIC Clemson Extension

They are particularly valued as ornamentals for their bright yellow, lacy flowers in mid to late fall and golden yellow fall leaf color. The flowers are lightly fragrant. Flowering may overlap fall leaf color, but the majority of the flowering period is after leaves have fallen. Best flowering occurs in full sun.



Fall color emerging on common witch hazel.  
The Dow Gardens Archive, Dow Gardens, Bugwood.org

While this witch hazel blooms in fall, other witch hazel species are late winter or early spring flowering, and are sometimes confused with large forsythias. The narrow, strap-like flower petal shape is similar to that of loropetalum (*Loropetalum chinense*) and fothergillas (*Fothergilla* sp.) which are also members of the witch hazel family (Hamamelidaceae).

Witch hazel trees are open, irregularly spreading, with smooth, light gray bark. Pruning is rarely necessary. If needed, prune common witch hazel after flowering any time throughout the winter. Most other witch hazels bloom in mid to late winter or early spring. These later blooming witch hazels should be pruned after they have finished flowering in early spring.

Witch hazel was commonly used as a medicinal plant by Native Americans and is still used today as a mildly astringent water extract made from the leaves and bark. Branches were also historically used as water-dowsing wands.



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Seed capsules take up to a year to fully ripen.  
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Light green seed capsules gradually become woody and light brown with age. They ripen by the following autumn, then open and explosively launch black seeds up to 30 feet. Popping seed capsules can sometimes be heard when walking through wooded areas.

Witch hazels have no serious insect or disease problems. Insect galls caused by an aphid may appear on the foliage. Japanese beetles may chew on the leaves in some areas.



Millie Davenport, ©2006 HGIC, Clemson Extension

Galls created by witch hazel cone gall aphid.  
Millie Davenport ©2006 HGIC Clemson Extension

Propagation of witch hazels is by seed for the species, while named cultivars are typically grafted. Propagation by cuttings is difficult. Because seeds have physiological dormancy, they must be given alternating warm and cold treatments. This can be done naturally by harvesting seed in late summer and planting in an outdoor seed bed. Germination (sprouting) occurs the following spring.

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